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ABSTRACT

This guidebook contains materials from "NOTES Plus," the National Council of Teachers of English's (NCTE's) journal for the exchange of ideas by teachers and other English professionals. The suggestions presented here are meant for use by substitute teachers. The activities are divided into five categories: "Thinking and Writing with Precision," "Imaginative Problem Solving," "Description and Detail," "Poetry," and "Word Play." (MS)

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SUBSTITUTE TEACHERS' LESSON PLANS

CLASSROOM-TESTED ACTIVITIES
FROM THE NATIONAL COUNCIL
OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

National Council of Teachers of English
1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801

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CONTENTS

Introduction v

Thinking and Writing with Precision

Silence Exchange 1
Writing for an Audience 3
When Is a Fact Not a Fact? 4
Doodles and Directions 5
The Tin-Eared Editor Strikes Again 7
The Tin-Eared Editor Meets Strunk and White 10

Imaginative Problem Solving

Brainstorming with Bricks 13
Desert Dilemma 14
What If . . . ? 15
All's Well That Ends Well 17
Writing Half a Note 18
Discovering Oneself 19

Description and Detail

Story Starts 21
Possession Paragraph 22
A Journal-Writing Pot of Gold 24
Dressing Bare Bones 26
Four Approaches to the Same Shoe 29

Poetry

Omnipresent Poetry 30
Poetry on Change 32
Creating and Understanding Concrete Poetry 33

Word Play

Word Confetti 35
Anatomy Adjectives 38
A Dictionary for All 39
Vary Verbs 41
Erasmus and the Changing Sentence 43
Visual Contexts 44

INTRODUCTION

A Message to Principals, Teachers, and Substitutes

On those days when a regular English teacher must be out of the classroom, the question always arises: how can significant learning activity rather than "busy work" be carried out in the teacher's absence? Ideally, all absences could be predicted a day or two in advance; substitutes well-versed in the content and methods of English could be engaged; and the English teacher could confer with the substitute and leave behind materials tailor-made to assure orderly and meaningful advancement of the English program.

Unfortunately, ideal circumstances are relatively rare in the real world. Yet we owe good instruction to our students when regular teachers are absent. To meet this problem, the editors of *NOTES Plus,* NCTE's journal for exchange of ideas by teachers and other English professionals, have gathered some of the best materials from that journal for use by substitutes. The selection of materials was based on various criteria—educational soundness of the activities, manageability by a nonspecialist substitute, appropriate time span (usually, a single class period), adaptability to various grade levels, and variety in content and format.

Every activity in this book has been created and used by experienced English teachers. None, though, requires technical knowledge of literary concepts or demands expert pedagogical skills. The highly experienced substitute teacher might well see opportunities for useful embellishment of the activities, such as extended prewriting discussion, addition of small group work, or peer editing of composition assignments. But by and large, the materials have been selected and adapted so that a nonspecialist can conduct lively and significant instruction in English. The emphasis in the activities is on the *processes* of speaking, listening, and writing in the classroom—activities which, when guided by a sympathetic adult facilitator, are at the core of students' growth in communicative abilities. Additionally, teachers and substitutes are invited to photocopy the handouts and student instructions for classroom distribution, thus making classroom management and implementation of the activities easier.

Of course, these descriptions of classroom activities are not "lesson plans" in a formulaic sense. One could analyze and reconstruct them formally in terms of their objectives and component parts, adding jargon that lends a fashionable patina to the materials. But as Wordsworth said, we need not "murder to dissect." This book, like the *NOTES Plus* periodical from which it is derived, uses a straightforward approach. The goals of utility and educational value are best served in this context by eschewing formulas and concentrating on clear presentation of classroom-tested materials.

There are many productive ways to use this book. Principals can provide copies for all English teachers for use when absences are anticipated, and can keep copies on hand for substitutes who need immediate help when unexpected absences occur. English teachers, knowing their own students and programs best, can review all of the activities and select those best suited for use in their absence, leaving instructions for the substitute with the principal, department chair, or other appropriate colleague. Substitutes can keep copies as part of their repertoire of useful teaching ideas.

If you like the materials in this short volume, you will be interested in *NOTES Plus* and other periodicals and books for middle school, junior high, and senior high school teachers from the National Council of Teachers of English. For further information, see the last page of this book or write to NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801.

Charles Suhor
Deputy Executive Director, NCTE

THINKING AND WRITING WITH PRECISION

Silence Exchange

Most get-acquainted activities encourage conversation within the classroom—and rightly so—but here's one based on an entire period of creative, productive *silence!* If students in your classroom are not already seated in rows, you will need to rearrange desks and chairs in rows of four or five.

Ask students what our primary form of communication is and they will probably say talking. Then explain that for this class period their only mode of communication will be writing. From the moment they receive the instruction sheet you are about to distribute, no words are to be spoken until you signal that the period is about to end. If, after reading the assignment sheet carefully, someone has a question, he or she should write it on a piece of paper and hand it to you. You will answer—in writing. Then hand out the following instructions.

The art of silence is as great as that of speech.

—German proverb

Everything you do from this point on will be in writing. No one is allowed to speak until I give a signal five minutes before the end of the class period. Read the following instructions carefully. If you don't understand something, write your question on a piece of paper and hand it to me. I will respond in writing.

The object of this assignment is to write a paper in which you describe the students seated in your row. Their similarities and differences will be the primary focus on this paper.

Steps

1. Take a sheet of paper for each student in your row, excluding yourself. List four or five questions on each sheet to be answered by the person receiving that sheet. Don't ask questions that can be answered with yes or no. Instead, ask questions that will help you to describe that person—hobbies or special interests, size of family, temperament (easy-going or explosive). Don't ask the very same questions on each sheet, but do ask everyone two or three of the same questions. Provide a blank for the respondent to write his or her first and last name. Write your name at the bottom of the sheet so students will know to whom to return the questionnaire.
2. When you have completed the questionnaires, give one to each person in your row.

3. When your questionnaires are returned, read the answers to your questions thoughtfully. Look for similarities and differences among the students in your row.
4. Begin by drafting an original and interesting introductory paragraph about the people in your row in general.
5. Now describe each person in a separate paragraph. Do not begin the paragraph with "Susie Smith is. . ." or "Susie Smith likes. . ."; instead, begin with the name of Susie's hobby or favorite subject in school or a phrase describing her personality.
6. After you have described each person, close with a paragraph that summarizes what you have learned about the people in your row.
7. Think of an appropriate title, and proofread your paper if you have time. Hand in your work at the end of the class period.

If you are on a two-day substitute assignment, you may want to take time the second day for sharing and discussion of the papers.

Cynthia Seifert, Lincoln Junior High School, Mount Prospect, Illinois

Writing for an Audience

Writing for a particular audience for a particular purpose is an effective assignment for producing clear, concise student compositions.

Hold up for the class a common object such as a tape dispenser, a calculator, a key, a stapler, a necktie, or a paperweight. Ask students to choose one assignment from a list on the chalkboard. Students are not to tell anyone else which assignment they chose. I've had success with the following assignments:

1. Examine the object and describe it so that your reader can walk into a store and pick it out from all others similar to it.
2. Write a memo to your superior at the office convincing him or her that this object should be purchased for all the employees in your company.
3. Explain to someone who has never seen this object how to use it efficiently.
4. You are an archaeologist two hundred years from now. Write in your journal about this object you have just unearthed.
5. Suppose you came to school and discovered you *were* the object. How would you spend your day?
6. Tell a story about the object to a kindergarten class.

Each student writes a paragraph according to the chosen directions; then volunteers read their paragraphs aloud, *without telling the class which assignment they choose*. The class must guess what each student's instructions were and for what audience the writing is intended.

Shirley Vaux, Valley View Junior High School, Edina, Minnesota

When Is a Fact Not a Fact?

To help my students think consciously about tone and style in writing, I set up situations or topics that give them practice in adopting different points of view on a particular subject. For example, for each of the following topics, students write three separate paragraphs, each from a different point of view.

1. Describe a school dance
   a. the way you saw it.
   b. the way a chaperone saw it.
   c. through the eyes of the band's drummer.
2. Describe this year's fashions for teens
   a. from your viewpoint.
   b. from your parents' (or grandparents') viewpoint.
   c. from the point of view of a fashion designer.
   d. from a department store salesperson's point of view.
3. Describe a triple-scoop ice cream cone
   a. from a five-year-old's point of view on a hot July day.
   b. from the viewpoint of a Baskin-Robbins marketing director.
   c. as a specialist in nutrition sees it.
4. Relate a front page news story of your choice
   a. from your point of view.
   b. from your teacher's or your parents' point of view.
   c. from the point of view of a famous person from history.

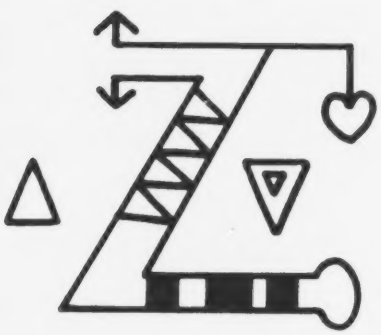
In the discussion that follows writing, students may be encouraged to evaluate how well they developed the different viewpoints. They might consider whether each separate paragraph has a distinct tone appropriate to its supposed author and whether details are used effectively.

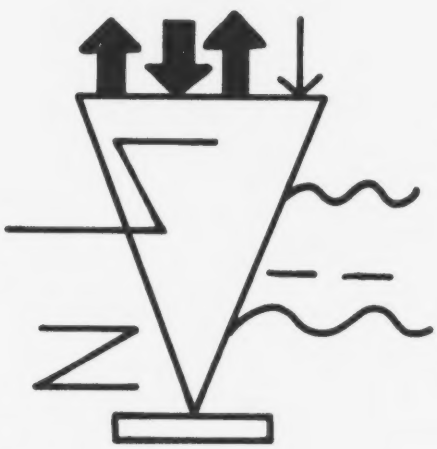
Maryann Smith, Mogadore High School, Mogadore, Ohio

Doodles and Directions

The exercise described below can be used as a springboard for any number of activities requiring close attention to language. It involves everyone in the class in speaking, listening, and interpreting verbal instructions.

First students pair up and find seats next to their partners. One student out of each pair faces the board, and the other turns his or her chair to face the opposite direction. The students facing the board will be the "speakers" and the students with their backs to the board will be the "listeners." At this point tack up on the board a large piece of drawing paper on which you have drawn an abstract figure such as one of the following.





The speaker must describe the figure in such a way that the listener can, *without looking*, accurately reproduce it with pencil on a sheet of 8 1/2″ × 11″ paper. At no time may the speaker look at his or her partner's paper, point at the board or at the drawing in progress, or use any means besides verbal communication to describe the figure. The listener may not talk or ask questions, but should concentrate on listening to and interpreting as carefully as possible the speaker's instructions.

When the speaker has described the entire figure, the listener writes both partners' names on the drawing, and raises his or her hand to indicate that the pair is done. Until all students are finished, listeners should remain with their backs to the board and students should refrain from unnecessary talking. Collect drawings as they are completed and hold them at your desk until all students are finished. Then post all the drawings on the board for examination and discussion of what went right and what went wrong with the speakers' descriptions and the listeners' responses.

Discussion inevitably leads listeners to feel that they would have been better speakers than were their partners, and vice versa. You can resolve this argument by allowing students to switch roles with their partners and try the exercise again with a different figure. They're likely to discover that neither speaking nor listening—accurately—is as easy as it sounds.

M. Kozacik, Independence High School, Charlotte, North Carolina

The Tin-Eared Editor Strikes Again

The purpose of this exercise is twofold: to heighten students' awareness of repetitive and clumsy phrasing and to increase their sense of the options available to them in writing and revising their own texts.

1. Make photographic copies of the handout. Cut the pages on the dotted line so that the answer key can be held until later.
2. Distribute the top sheet to your students, making sure that they understand the instructions. If necessary, explain the meaning of words like *pompous, jargon, adulterants.*
3. Complete the exercise along with your students without consulting the answer key. Aside from the fact that the exercise provides an interesting opportunity to analyze your own response to the text, you will increase your credibility with students by doing activities they are asked to do. Also, you can refer to your own approach to editing in the discussion that follows.
4. Discuss with your class the words and phrases they deleted in each sentence. When you come to the lengthy second sentence in the second paragraph, consider the segments that precede each comma independently. Discussion should focus on why certain words and phrases were or were not deleted. Students who chose not to delete words or phrases cited by other students can be asked to give the reasons for their choices.

   A number of the deletions will be made for simple semantic reasons: repetition, for example, in phrases like "function or purpose," mere padding in phrases like "serve to" or words like "very." Reasons for other deletions might relate to subtler aspects of the text—more graceful rhythm, for example, or the need for emphasis or de-emphasis. The goal of the discussion is to exchange ideas about style rather than to "decide" whether a particular deletion should or should not have been made.
5. Distribute the answer keys, which can be used to compare Zinsser's version with the student's edited text by placing the key underneath the handout and lining up the black square with the empty square. The boxed passages reveal the words added by the Tin-Eared Editor. The sheets can be held up to the light for a clearer image.
6. Read Zinsser's version aloud, capturing as much as possible the strength and fluidity of the cadence. Ask students to recall points raised in the discussion. Did

any of them delete some of Zinsser's original words? Did any of them like the additions provided by the Tin-Eared Editor? Once again, emphasize that Zinsser's version is not necessarily the best possible expression of the ideas in the text. In fact, if Zinsser were rereading the material, he might choose to make certain changes, as professional writers often do in revision.

Remember the dual goal of the exercise—to heighten the students' sense of clean, clear writing and to make them aware of the genuine stylistic options available to writers. This exercise, along with other discussions of writing models by professionals and by fellow students, can be cited as a point of reference when students are revising their own work and offering suggestions to others in peer editing sessions.

Charles Suhor, Deputy Executive Director, NCTE

The Tin-Eared Editor Strikes Again

The Tin-Eared Editor believes that more is better—more syllables, longer words, stringier sentences, fatter paragraphs. He believes that readers don't get ideas, even simple ideas, if they are stated only once, and that readers should enjoy the extra words he adds to the text he edits.

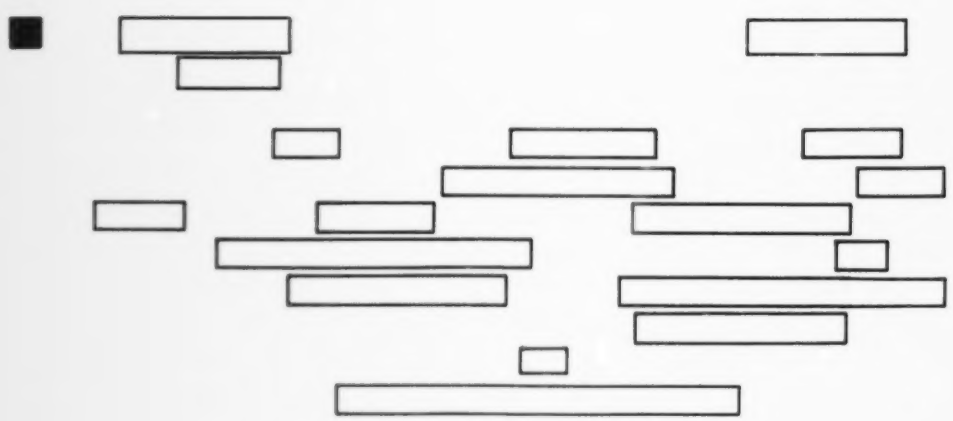
The Tin-Eared Editor read a passage from William Zinsser's *On Writing Well*, and he missed the point completely. "Take a look at how very, very much I've improved upon this writer's inadequate, unsatisfactory, and generally poor writing style," he told an Editor Trainee. The trainee looked, and gulped. "Are you *sure* all of those words should have been added?"

Your job is to help the Editor Trainee trim down the Tin-Eared Editor's revision. Don't change any words. Just strike words or phrases that you think are not needed to make the text clear. Later, you'll compare the changes you made with those of your classmates and with the original Zinsser version.

☐ In my opinion, clutter is the disease of American writing in this country. We are a society of people strangling in unnecessary words, circular constructions, pompous frills and meaningless jargon.

The secret of really good writing is for the writer to try to strip each and every sentence to its cleanest components of which it is made up. Every word that actually serves little or no function or purpose, every long word with many syllables that could be a short word which has fewer syllables in it, every adverb that carries the very same meaning that is already a meaning contained in the verb appearing in the same sentence, every passive construction that leaves the reader unsure or not quite certain of who is doing what—these are the thousand and one bad adulterants that serve to weaken the very strength of a sentence written by a weak, incompetent writer.

Answer Key



The Tin-Eared Editor Meets Strunk and White

The purpose of this exercise is twofold: to heighten students' awareness of repetitive and clumsy phrasing and to increase their sense of the options available to them in writing and revising their own texts.

1. Make photocopies of the handout. Cut the pages on the dotted line so that the answer key can be held until later.
2. Distribute the top sheet to your students, making sure that they understand the instructions. If necessary, explain the meaning of words like *eccentricities, infraction,* and *crossbreeding*.
3. Complete the exercise along with your students without consulting the answer key. Aside from the fact that the exercise provides an interesting opportunity to analyze your own response to the text, you will increase your credibility with students by doing activities they are asked to do. Also, you can refer to your own approach to editing in the discussion that follows.
4. Discuss with your class the words and phrases they deleted in each sentence. Discussion should also focus on why certain words and phrases were or were not deleted. Students who chose not to delete words or phrases cited by other students can be asked to give the reason for their choices.

   A number of deletions will be made for simple semantic reasons: repetition, for example, in phrases like "profoundly, deeply influence," "function or purpose"; mere padding in phrases like "to furnish an example" or works like "very." Reasons for other deletions might relate to subtler aspects of the text—more graceful rhythm, for example, or the need for emphasis or de-emphasis. The goal of the discussion is to exchange ideas about style rather than to "decide" whether a particular deletion should or should not have been made.
5. Distribute the answer keys, which can be used to compare the Strunk and White version with the student's edited text by placing the key underneath the handout and lining up the black square with the empty square. The boxed passages reveal the words added by the Tin-Eared Editor. The sheets can be held up to the light for a clearer image.
6. Read the Strunk and White version aloud, capturing as much as possible the strength and fluidity of the cadence. Ask students to recall points raised in the discussion. Did any of them delete some of the original words? Did any of them like the additions provided by the Tin-Eared Editor? Once again, emphasize that the

> Strunk and White version is not necessarily the best possible expression of the ideas in the text. In fact, if the authors themselves could reread the passage, they might choose to make certain changes, as professional writers often do in revision.

Remember the dual goal of the exercise—to heighten the student's sense of clean, clear writing and to make them aware of the genuine stylistic options available to writers. This exercise, along with other discussions of writing models by professionals and by fellow students, can be cited as a point of reference when students are revising their own work and offering suggestions to others in peer-editing sessions.

Charles Suhor, Deputy Executive Director, NCTE

The Tin-Eared Editor Meets Strunk and White

The Tin-Eared Editor is slow in getting the point. "I'm still of the strong conviction and opinion that more words and phrases are productive of much better sentences and longer, weightier paragraphs," he told the Editor Trainee.

"But don't writing experts like Strunk and White stress concise writing rather than long, meandering sentences?" the Trainee asked.

"You'd be utterly surprised to learn how little *those* sentence-pinching misers know!" was the reply. "Just take a look at the way I've worked to improve their substandard, unsatisfactory, and generally weak writing skills in my revised version of these sentences from their book called *The Elements of Style*."

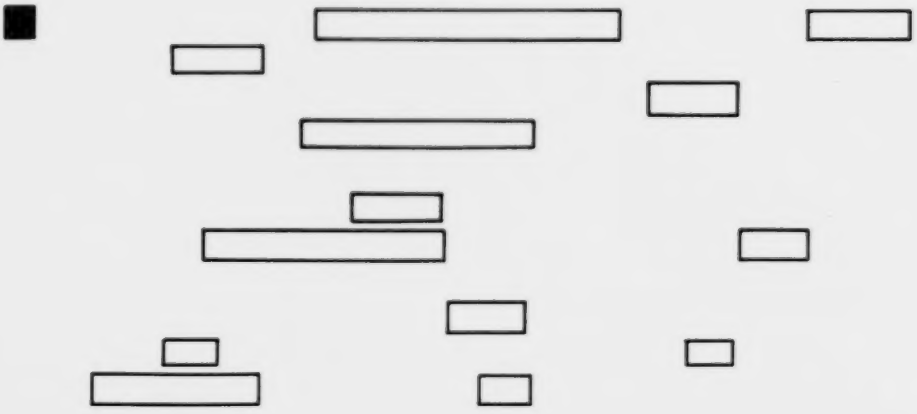
The Editor Trainee read the revision, rolled his eyes, and thought, "The Tin-Eared Editor strikes again."

Your job is to help the Editor Trainee repair the Tin-Eared Editor's revision. Don't change any words. Just strike words or phrases that you think are not needed to make the text clear. Later, you'll compare the changes you made with those of your classmates and with the original Strunk and White version.

☐ The young writer because of his inexperience will be drawn at each and every turn toward unusual eccentricities in language. He will hear the beat of new vocabularies, the exciting rhythms of special segments of his society of today, each speaking a language of its own. All of us at one time or another come under the spell of these unsettling drums; the problem, for the beginner, is to listen to them, learn the words, feel the excitement, and not be carried away by them.

Today, to furnish an example, the language of advertising really enjoys an enormous circulation. With its deliberate infractions of grammatical rules and its crossbreeding of the parts of speech, it profoundly, deeply influences the tongues and pens of children and adults alike. Your new kitchen range is so revolutionary that it *obsoletes* all other ranges from past times. Your counter top is very beautiful because is is *accessorized* with gold-plated faucets.

Answer Key



IMAGINATIVE PROBLEM SOLVING

Brainstorming with Bricks

If your students are even distantly related to mine, their level of imagination has often diminished by the time they reach senior high. Students who began kindergarten cheerfully creating imaginary playmates often end up in tenth grade sitting on their hands. Fortunately, the situation is not irreversible. The answer is not more papers on "How I Spent My Summer Vacation." ("How I Didn't Spend My Summer Vacation" would be better.) Instead, try simple exercises to get students to think in unconventional terms. Suggest, for example, that an eccentric uncle has just left them ten million . . . bricks. They can use them in any way they want—except to build with. Ask each student to spend fifteen minutes compiling a list of ways to use the bricks. In the remaining time, students may take turns sharing their ideas with the rest of the class, while you record the ideas on the chalkboard.

Below are suggestions to help you get started. Objects other than bricks can of course be used, but whatever you choose, start building their collective imaginations.

Uses for 10,000,000 bricks

- grind them down for eye shadow
- Brillo pads for the Jolly Green Giant's frying pan
- holding down clouds
- earrings
- conversation pieces on coffee tables
- life rafts for suicidal roaches
- big dominoes
- platform shoes
- airmail stationery for people who can afford anything
- bobbing for bricks at Halloween
- knife sharpeners
- gift-wrapped, all-occasion presents
- small tombstones
- subjects of poems

William Gallagher, Shikellamy High School, Sunbury, Pennsylvania

Desert Dilemma

As an introduction to the novel *Deathwatch* by Robb White, I developed a discussion exercise that is similar to the Space Survival Task. Even if you are not planning to teach this novel, this exercise demonstrates one method of problem solving—listing and ranking options. The handout I use is shown below.

> You are stranded in the desert dressed in summer clothing. In your desperation you have driven fifty miles off the road, and now your car is out of gas. There is nothing around you but cactus and sand, and it is 110° in the shade. You must try to reach the highway. You can carry only a limited number of things with you.
>
> Look at the list below. Your task is to rank the fifteen items in order of their importance and utility in ensuring your survival. Place 1 by the most important item, 2 by the second most important, and so on through 15, the least important survival item. Consider what you know about the desert in making your decisions. Work individually; later we will discuss our choices.
>
> _____ any part of the car
> _____ sunglasses
> _____ jar of Tang
> _____ 4 Hershey bars
> _____ map of the state
> _____ box of matches
> _____ silk scarf
> _____ 50 feet of nylon rope
> _____ first-aid kit
> _____ AM-FM radio
> _____ lipstick
> _____ blanket
> _____ slingshot
> _____ pair of boots
> _____ Coleman lantern

Just as important as the task of ranking is the follow-up class discussion. Students find out how their classmates ranked the items and have a choice to justify or revise their own choices.

Marcie Belgard, Carmichael Junior High School, Richland, Washington

What If . . . ?

Students welcome the opportunity to use their imaginations. This activity calls for imaginative thinking, plus it stimulates logical thinking and thinking of consequences of actions.

Present students with an outlandish "what if" statement that will interest them. Here are some examples to get you started:

1. What if all the junk food in the vending machines were replaced by health food snacks?
2. What if everyone were required to come to school on a skateboard?
3. What if you were named principal for a day?
4. What if the school played your favorite radio station on the intercom all day?
5. What if students were not permitted to speak once inside the school building?
6. What if students were required to take just one course each semester?

Write the "what if" statement in the center of the chalkboard and ask students to think of positive and negative effects that might occur as a result. Draw three lines out in different directions from the question and list three of these effects. The skateboard question, for example, might produce the following effects:

1. The school parking lot would be abandoned.
2. Skateboard sales and repair services would boom.
3. People at school would become more physically fit.

Draw three lines out from each of these statements and have students suggest possible effects resulting from these statements. For example, the empty parking lot might result in the following:

1. The parking lot could be used for skateboard races and other sports activities.
2. Car and gas sales would go down.
3. Police patrols of the school grounds could be cut.

This branching could go on and on, but by now the idea of cause and effect is comfortable for students, details are building, and the outline for an essay is clearly visible. Have each student write an essay taking the "what if" statement to its logical conclusions.

The completed essays are read aloud to the class, and the listeners suggest additional positive and negative effects that might result from each "what if" statement.

Beverly Haley, The Language Works, Fort Morgan, Colorado

All's Well That Ends Well

In teaching the organization of a paragraph, most of us begin with the topic sentence and have students write sentences supporting it. For a change of pace that also helps to teach students organization, I work backwards. I give the students the *last* sentence of a paragraph and ask them to fill in the details that lead to this conclusion. As students think about how they must get to the concluding sentence, they see an outline, a structure, and organization developing. Concluding sentences that have worked well with my classes are:

1. Suddenly, everything became black.
2. Wow! I did it!
3. She paused to look back at the now quiet, empty classroom, and then shut and locked the door.
4. Finally, I knew I had succeeded.
5. This day I will never forget.
6. _____ is really my best friend.
7. The sweet, sugary taste lingered in my mouth.
8. Thank goodness this day is over at last!
9. We just smiled at each other.
10. "All's well that ends well."

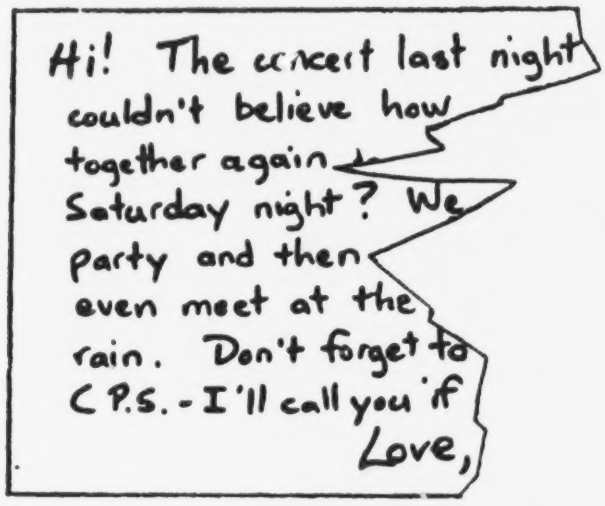
After students have had time to write, ask volunteers to read their paragraphs aloud. Listeners may comment on which paragraphs are best organized or most imaginative.

Janet Steim, Chino High School, Alta Loma, California

Writing Half a Note

Photocopies of a torn note can be used to pique students' curiosity and introduce a short writing exercise. I give students the instructions below and distribute copies of the partial note shown.

> A note is left taped to your door, but before you find it, someone rips it in half. You have only the piece shown. What do you think the note originally said? Write out the complete note and then write a response to it.



Students are given time to write, and are then asked to read and compare the final versions as a class.

William G. Altland, Milton Hershey School, Hershey, Pennsylvania

Discovering Oneself

In this assignment, students take a close look at some of their own beliefs, attitudes, and values and then discuss these feelings with classmates.

I hand out to students a list of situations involving moral choices and conflicts. Listed below are some sample situations I've had my students discuss.

1. Your best friend borrows your literature homework. When the teacher grades the assignment, she finds that your paper and your friend's contain identical paragraphs. She gives both papers a zero, which lowers your nine-week grade from A to B. How do you feel about your best friend now and about the teacher's actions? Will you go to the teacher and try to explain? How will you react to your friend? What values and beliefs do your actions suggest that you hold?
2. A new girl appears in school. She wears excessive makeup and dressy clothes that are much too mature looking for her age. Your crowd decides to shun her. What will you do? Why? What values are you demonstrating? How important are they to you?
3. Your father has grounded you for the next six months because you came in thirty minutes late from your Saturday night date. How would you react to the penalty? What does your reaction say about your beliefs and values? What action would you take? What would such action suggest about your values?
4. Your mother instructs you not to be friends with David any longer because he is rumored to be selling drugs and she is afraid you will be influenced by him. You have been very close to David for several years and see him as a good friend. What would be your response? Describe your attitude toward her ultimatum. How would you react? What values do your comments and decisions reflect?
5. You have just had a verbal fight with Andrea, a classmate whom you have never liked because she has been a "troublemaker" all through high school. She is a bore at parties and often tries to be the center of attention. That same night, Andrea is killed in a car accident. What would you do—contact her family to express sympathy, go to the funeral? How would you feel about having had an argument with her? What do your reactions say about your values?
6. The National Science Foundation has offered you a scholarship to a computer camp at your state university for the summer. You want to go, but you also want to play softball on your league team, and your boyfriend (girlfriend) doesn't want you to

accept the scholarship. What will you do? Why? What values are illustrated through your choice?

7. You and your friend Marc have been sent to the store to purchase supplies for the school play. While the salesclerk isn't looking, you see Marc steal three tapes and hide them in a bag he is carrying. What do you say or do? Why? What values does your decision reflect?

8. You are the fifth player on your basketball team when a new student transfers to your school. He (she) was an all-state player at his (her) school and would increase the chances of your high school playing in the state tournament. How will you act toward the new student? How do you feel about him (her)? What are your options? What do these options say about your attitudes and values?

After students have had a chance to look over the handout, ask for reactions to the first situation. Discuss each situation in turn, encouraging students to think about what beliefs, attitudes, and values they are expressing.

When similar moral dilemmas arise in forthcoming literature assignments, students are better able to identify with the character who faces a moral choice and to understand why a particular choice is made.

Shirley R. Chafin, Johnson Central High School, Paintsville, Kentucky

DESCRIPTION AND DETAIL

Story Starts

Here is a creative-writing idea that has worked well in my classes. The student guidelines below are intended for a group of fifteen (fourteen students and a participating teacher), but the activity can be adapted to accommodate any class size. (A large class could be divided into two or more groups; the teacher can guarantee that all "story starts" will have about the same number of responses by adjusting the number of continuations allowed per page.)

1. Start three stories or poems—one on a serious topic, one on a humorous topic, and one on an imaginative topic. Each "start" should be twenty to thirty words in length and should begin on a separate page. Write your name in the upper right-hand corner of each page.
2. After you have started three poems or stories, put them in the box at the front of the room and take out a page started by someone else. Write a twenty- to thirty-word continuation of the story or poem on that page and write your initials beside your continuation. Then return the page to the box and take out another one.
3. Keep track of whose papers you write on so that you don't write on more than one poem or story by the same student. By the end of the class period, you should have written continuations on fourteen different poems or stories, one started by each member of the class.
4. When your continuation is the fifth on a page (not including the start), give the page back to the original author. (Not all starts will receive five continuations; some will receive four.) The original author is then to add a thirty- to fifty-word conclusion.

The creative writings produced by this group effort are always interesting to read and discuss in class.

Dan Baker, Tri-City Junior Academy, Pasco, Washington

Possession Paragraph

One writing assignment that is often used successfully to motivate students is a request for several pages of unrestricted stream-of-consciousness style prose on any topic that comes to mind. But providing free rein is not the only effective way to interest students in writing. A structured assignment like the following challenges students' resourcefulness and thus stimulates creative writing. I've had great success with this writing assignment that emphasizes descriptive detail. It produces papers with fascinating and varied content that virtually call out for sharing. The assignment I give is outlined below and has three major parts: general requirements, sample paragraph, and prewriting plan.

Requirements

Describe as accurately and specifically as you can your most valued possession, but do *not* mention what it is anywhere in your paper. In addition, your writing must meet these requirements:

1. Length: one fully developed paragraph with no fewer than six specific details describing your possession. You may write two paragraphs and double the number of details.
2. Your description must contain one comparison; for example, "a color like the whiteness of new-fallen snow."

Sample Paragraph

I think you'll guess my most valued possession before you finish the paragraph below. When you think you've got the idea, go on to the prewriting exercise that follows.

> Burnt orange, like an autumn sunset, it carries me over river, stream, and pond. Fifteen feet of solid construction, yet it glides smooth and silent, almost effortlessly guided by my strength and will. It is modern plastic in construction, yet to be in it reminds me of its birch bark forebearers. Durable as technology can make it, yet it brings me back to the pristine beauty of raw nature. Like a beast of burden it carries me, my dog, a tent, sleeping bag, food and fishing gear, carries all to escape from the hustle bustle of the mundane world. All this, yet I can carry it upon my shoulders when the need arises!

Prewriting

Close your eyes and bring to mind your most valued possession. Look at it in your imagination; walk around it in your mind to see it from all angles; climb up on something

and look down on it from above. Now go on to answer in writing the two sets of questions below. Include the answers to the questions with your finished paragraph. If you have difficulty answering the questions, come back to the mind's eye step above and begin again.

Concrete Details

1. What color is your most valued possession?
2. What size is it?
3. How is it shaped?
4. How does it work?
5. What is its use (function)?
6. What does it smell (taste) like?
7. How does it feel to the touch?
8. Does it make any sound? What kind?
9. How did you get it?
10. How long have you had it?

Comparisons

1. If your most valued possession were an animal, what would it be? Why?
2. If it were a fruit or vegetable, what would it be? Why?
3. What season does it remind you of? Why?
4. How do your react when you have it near?
5. How do you react when you don't have it around?
6. Would it be enjoyed most by a young person, a middle-aged person, or an old person? Why?
7. What object in nature does it most remind you of?
8. What object in your house does it most remind you of?
9. Does it make you think of any person you know? Why?
10. What emotion best fits it?

The completed paragraphs may be read aloud for the class; students in the audience may indicate at what point they knew what the author's "most valued possession" was and what specific details they liked the best. Students in the audience may also offer suggestions for making the paragraph even more effective.

Michael Dolcemascolo, North Syracuse Junior High School, North Syracuse, New York

A Journal-Writing Pot of Gold

Directed journal writing gives students the kind of daily practice in composing they need to turn quantity into quality. I give my students general journal-topic lists which they keep for reference. Students are free to write on any of the topics in any entry. Picking something from the list simply provides a starting point and a direction. Sometimes I also make specific journal writing assignments that expand on something we're doing in class.

You can adapt the following topic list to suit your needs—or use it as a guide to draw up your own. In either case, I think you'll be happy with the results. (I also remind students to date each notebook entry, to write every day, and to use both sides of the paper.)

If you set aside a class period for writing, leave enough time for reading and discussion at the end. There are usually a few students brave enough to share their work (and if not, you can offer to do the reading for them), and the whole class can benefit from the resulting discussion.

1. Begin or end some of your journal entries by completing this statement—and commenting on it, if you wish: "Today was like a. . ."
2. Start pages of lists of various types and add to the lists at any time. Some ideas to get you started: things that make you angry or sad or happy, pet peeves, sounds you hear as you sit quietly or as you think back over your day, snatches of conversations overheard, books you've read, songs you'd like, dreams or hopes, memories, questions you'd like answered, things you'd like changed. Later you can use these lists to write other entries—poems or stories or opinion pieces.
3. Try to explain something that puzzles you.
4. Write your opinion on a current controversial topic such as censorship or rock music, a new school rule, or raising the drinking age.
5. Tell about a funny experience you've had (or a sad or exciting or frightening or challenging experience).
6. Describe the most expensive thing you ever bought and how you got the money for it; tell why you wanted it and whether it was worth the price.
7. Describe an older person you know or have known.
8. Describe a person. Include details such as physical characteristics, personality traits, and how others regard that person.

9. What can you tell about a person by stepping into his or her room? What could an outsider tell about you by stepping into your room?
10. Tell about your most prized possession and explain why you treasure it.
11. Based on your experiences, give advice on a particular topic to a younger person.
12. Tell what you like about the area where you live as well as what you don't like about it.
13. If you had only two days left to live, tell how you would spend them.
14. Describe a time when you lost something important to you. What were you thinking and feeling? What did you do to try to get it back? If you got it back, or if you didn't, how did you feel?

Irina Markova, U-32 High School, Montpelier, Vermont

Dressing Bare Bones

Try this for a variation on the descriptive writing exercise. Students will gain more than writing practice; they'll become sensitive to the myriad of choices the writer has in creating a mood and to the way personal writing style can be expressed through these choices.

Give your students the bare skeleton of a paragraph from a novel by a noted author, without revealing the author or source. Two possibilities for use are provided here. Ask students to use their creative powers to flesh out the paragraph and develop a mood--to add vivid details, to liven up the nouns and verbs with adjectives and adverbs, to replace dull words with interesting synonyms, and to alter the structure and length of sentences as they see fit.

Then distribute copies of the original author's version of the paragraph and read it aloud. Ask students to share and compare the choices they made in their own paragraphs. As they do this, they can also react to the choices and decisions made by a practiced writer in constructing a similar paragraph.

Jane Carroll, Arvada, Colorado

Skeleton Paragraphs for Use with "Dressing Bare Bones"

Paragraph #1

She wore a dress and an apron. She was neat and tidy, but her shoelaces were untied. She looked ahead. She had blue eyes. Her skin was very wrinkled, and her cheeks were yellow under the dark. From her head rag, a ringlet of black hair hung down onto her neck.

Paragraph #2

I found myself in a large room. The windows were so high above the floor as to be unreachable. Faint light came through the windows. This made it possible to see some of the objects in the room. However, it was still impossible to see very far. The walls were hung with draperies. The furniture was uncomfortable, old, and torn. Even the books and musical instruments lying around couldn't give the room life. The atmosphere was sorrowful. Everything about the room was gloomy.

Original Versions of Skeleton Paragraphs

Paragraph #1

From "A Worn Path" by Eudora Welty

She wore a dark striped dress reaching down to her shoe tops, and an equally long apron of bleached sugar sacks, with a full pocket; all neat and tidy, but every time she took a step she might have fallen over her shoelaces, which dragged from her unlaced shoes. She looked straight ahead. Her eyes were blue with age. Her skin had a pattern all its own of numberless branching wrinkles and as though a whole little tree stood in the middle of her forehead, but a golden color ran underneath, and the two knobs of her cheeks were illumined by a yellow burning under the dark. Under the red rag her hair came down on her neck in the frailest of ringlets, still black, and with an odor like copper.

Paragraph #2

From "The Fall of the House of Usher" by Edgar Allen Poe

The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all.

Four Approaches to the Same Shoe

Here's an activity that helps students distinguish among four main modes of writing by presenting them in one class period.

Select a personal object belonging to a student to use as a model—perhaps a running shoe or a backpack. Have students take out four sheets of paper and label the first *Explanations*. Allow students five minutes to explain the nature of the running shoe in a solid paragraph that identifies, classifies, or analyzes the shoe. Ask for a few volunteers to read their expositions and discuss them briefly, making certain that all students have written an explanatory paragraph.

Students label their second sheet *Description*. Have them use all five senses to describe the shoe: hearing, tasting, seeing, feeling, and even smelling. This last sense should make them eager to write. After about five minutes, call for volunteers to read their paragraphs aloud.

The third sheet, labeled *Narration*, is for a story involving the shoe—either as a prop or as a character. Again allow about five minutes for the writing and some time for discussion.

Students label their fourth sheet *Argumentation* and are instructed to convince a reader of the truth or falsity of a particular thesis somehow involving the shoe—why students wear running shoes or why this particular shoe is harmful to its owner's feet, for example. Caution students to present only one side of an issue and to base their argument on logic. Have a few students read their completed paragraphs aloud.

Conclude the activity by reviewing the four writing modes as developed in the student writings and by discussing similarities and differences among them.

Joan Winner, Hillsboro High School, Hillsboro, Ohio

POETRY

Omnipresent Poetry

Poetry is everywhere—and to prove it, here are three ways to convince students to get those ubiquitous verses down on paper. Remind students that poetry is the most diverse and flexible of all literary genres. Long or short, rhymed or unrhymed, narrative, dramatic, whimsical, or lyrical—poetry gives students the freedom to write what is important to them.

Name Game

What's in a name? Have students explain what's in theirs. Each student writes a rhymed acrostic poem in which the first letter of each line, reading vertically downward, spells his or her name (first, last, or nickname) and the verse tells something about the student's likes, dislikes, or personality. Like this:

> Mad about football
> And baseball and track,
> Try to play soccer
> Though I don't have the knack.

Mad Ads

Rival the ad experts! Instruct students to write a couplet (two rhyming lines) advertising their favorite food, place, or product. The couplet may be humorous or serious. For example:

> Eat Dom's pizza, you'll know why.
> There's no finer frozen pie.

Pass-Around Poetry

Give each student a rubber band and as many small slips of paper as there are students in the class. Assign each student a category or word (such as noun, verb, adjective, pronoun). Then instruct students to jot down a different word in their category on each slip of paper and to make a neat bundle of their slips using the rubber band. In an orderly fashion, students pass the bundles around the room, removing a slip of paper from each one. Students should take time to look over their collection of paper slips and to let their minds play freely with these miscellaneous words. Then they try to arrange their words in a pattern. They may omit some words, but they cannot add more than one additional word. Once they think they have found a meaningful pattern for their word col-

lection, they copy that arrangement as a poem on a piece of paper. Students may then take turns reading aloud their poems and explaining why they omitted and added the words they did.

Sandra Fisher, Belmont Career Center, St. Clairsville, Ohio

Poetry on Change

Time passes and things change. A favorite pair of jeans becomes faded and worn. A willow tree you remember planting reaches and passes the roof line. High school students are particularly sensitive to the theme of change; you can expect them to respond to the following two-part assignment with perceptive and witty descriptions.

Part one: Describe briefly how each of the following items might change over time.

A dollar bill	a paperback book
teeth	a toothbrush
hair	tires on a bike
your best friend	_____ (your choice)
a tomato	_____ (your choice)
a windshield wiper blade	_____ (your choice)

Part two: Choose any four items from the list above and write two rhyming lines about each one. Your verses may emphasize either the newness or the oldness of the item. For example:

A new dollar bill, so flat it looks pressed,
crumples in my pocket when I get dressed.

You may want to time the assignments to allow ten or fifteen minutes at the end of the class period for sharing the results.

Judith M. Schifferle, McKay Campus School, Fitchburg, Massachusetts

Creating and Understanding Concrete Poetry

This concrete poem provides an enjoyable literary experience, and a topical one as well if you contrive to introduce it near Columbus Day. The poem is best-suited for senior high school students, but the game-like approach suggested here makes it accessible to younger students as well.

1. Just before giving out the poem, explain that there is something unusual about its arrangement on the page. After students have had a minute or so to look at the sheet, ask if anyone has figured out how to read the poem so that it makes sense. (It's important to establish the right-to-left reading pattern early, since no further discussion is possible without this simple key.)
2. Give students time to read the poem to themselves; then read it aloud (or ask for a volunteer to do so) while others follow along. Here are some questions on which to build discussion of "Suppose Columbus" and of concrete poetry more generally.
   a. Explain how the author of the poem "reimagines" Columbus' voyage, and what the results of the new version of the voyage are.
   b. Silently reread line four, noticing your eye motion. How is that motion related to what the line says and to Columbus' actual voyage from Spain?
   c. Why do ships' names shift slightly more to the left each time they appear in the poem?
   d. Why are only two ships named in line thirteen? Only one in line fifteen?
   e. Are there other instances where the placement of words or phrases—especially at the ends of lines—is related to events as they occur in the poem?
   f. This poem would make sense if read aloud to someone who doesn't have a copy in hand. What would a listener miss, though, from an oral reading?
3. Explain to the students that this poem is just one example of a certain kind of poetry—*concrete poetry*. In a concrete poem, the placement of words on the page is related to the meaning of the poem. Experiment in class with simple one-word concrete poems, printing words like *uneven*, *roller coaster*, *conflict*, *nervous*, and *inflammation* on the chalkboard. Ask students to arrange the words on a sheet of paper in ways that relate to the words' meanings. Emphasize that they can change the sizes and, to some extent, the shapes of letters as well as arranging them in different patterns on the page.

Charles Suhor, Deputy Executive Director, NCTE

Suppose Columbus

wrong been had Columbus Suppose
sheet this as flat was earth the Suppose
goodships the And

NINA PINTA MARIA SANTA

East the to get to west Traveling
the is fact the But

NINA PINTA MARIA SANTA

cliff watery a towards Racing
the of nests crow's the in And

NINA PINTA MARIA SANTA

"!ho Land" cry to wanting men Frightened
the on But

PINTA MARIA SANTA

gone was ship sister their that only crying Men
the on And

MARIA SANTA

gone were ships sister his that only crying man crazed A
end the and abyss airy an suddenly And
Columbus Of

WORD PLAY

Word Confetti

In this activity, students develop categorization, specification, and other relationship-making skills in a discussion context. Students begin by providing four fairly obvious categories for the confetti of words, but they go on to discover other kinds of relationships among the words *across the categories* and to create subcategories within the four main ones. Students also complete a second set of categories with words from their own vocabularies.

Step one. Distribute the handout, explaining that it is a first step in a lesson on thinking skills and language. Read the instructions together, offering an example: "If the words *apple, peas, sausage,* and *steak* were among the confetti words, you could group them in a single category. What would you name that category?" Give other examples if needed.

Students discuss the confetti words and agree on the most logical categorization, and a master chart is completed at the chalkboard.

Step two. Looking at the master chart, each student jots down words listed in *different* categories that can be connected with each other: *cold, glacier,* and *winter,* for example. Many such connections exist, and students probably noticed them while they were developing their original categories. *Pig* and *indigestion* is another cross-category pair. Ask students to write a one-sentence explanation of each connection they make across categories: "If you connected *pig* with *indigestion,* you might write down this explanation—'When people eat like pigs, they can get indigestion.' " As students discuss and compare their cross-category connections and explanatory sentences, help them understand the kinds of relationships they are making. For example, the pig and indigestion connection is a cause and effect relationship. An analogy is also built into the connection, since overeaters are being compared to pigs.

Step three. Ask students to look again at the four main categories. This time they are seeking subcategories within each major category. To explain, go back to the example of foods: "You could group the four foods—apples, peas, sausage, and steak—into two or even three subcategories. Which items would go into the subcategory 'meats'? Which would go into the subcategory 'plants'?" You might even ask students to subdivide "plants" into "fruits" and "vegetables."

Through class discussion, encourage students to explain the subcategorizations they have created. Several alternatives might be possible within a given column; accept all defensible categorizations.

Step four. Students now make their own charts with three columns for categories and space for eight potential items in each. Category titles such as hobbies, entertainers, and

fictional characters are appropriate, but you can substitute others or ask for suggestions from students. Give students a minute or two to fill in eight items for each category.

Discuss these newly completed categories with the entire class. You may again want to develop a master chart on the board. Students can then use their own lists or the master list as they look for words that link across categories (step two) and develop subcategories (step three).

Charles Suhor, Deputy Executive Director, NCTE

Word Confetti

The sixteen words below are scattered like confetti. Your job is to figure out four categories in which the words can be placed. Give a name to each of the categories and write those names in slots A through D on the chart. Then fill in the columns on the chart with the "confetti words" that fit each category. If some words seem to fit more than one category, choose the most appropriate category so that you end up with four words in each column.

cold bear summer spring

winter

fever

malaria

cliff glacier

butterfly

brook

mosquito indigestion fall pig

swamp

A.	B.	C.	D.
1.	1.	1.	1.
2.	2.	2.	2.
3.	3.	3.	3.
4.	4.	4.	4.

Anatomy Adjectives

Draw a large stick figure on the chalkboard. As a class, ask students to bring this outline to life through adjectives. List as many descriptors as possible, following the categories shown below or devising others of your own.

Next, with the stick figure and word lists still on the chalkboard, ask students to select adjectives that seem to go together and to develop paragraphs that describe a person or creature. Through careful word choice, a student may come up with a description of a monster, the Six Million Dollar Man, a character from a story, or someone in the room. After the descriptive paragraphs have been shared with the class, students may use pens or crayons to sketch the beings they have in mind.

Gloria DeGaetano, Issaquah School District, Issaquah, Washington

A Dictionary for All

Students often feel confused and frustrated by dictionary definitions. One of the more difficult problems in discovering meaning for a word is the elusive quality of abstract words and word connotations. To clarify such defining, I ask my students to produce a dictionary of abstract terms, each term to be defined with a sentence that shows, rather than tells, its meaning to four different age groups: young children, teenagers, adults, and senior citizens.

I explain to the students that the sentences need to contain a concrete image that a person from each age group would normally associate with the word. I give some examples of how to tailor the image for each age group:

Envy

For children: Watching a baseball player bat a ball when you have trouble lifting the bat.

For teenagers: Watching HIM (or HER) walk to class with someone else.

For adults: Watching a fellow worker get the promotion you wanted.

For senior citizens: Watching a healthy teenager jog down the road.

Courage

For children: Confessing to your near-hysterical parent that it was you who spilled the grape juice on the new carpet.

For teenagers: Not sending an SOS to your family to bring a change of clothes when you get to school and discover this is *not* the date for costume day.

For adults: Standing firm in denying your teenager permission to attend a questionable party that "everyone" is going to.

For senior citizens: Maintaining trust, love, and respect for your grandchildren when they behave in ways alien to your own upbringing.

Then the students are on their own with this list of words:

loyalty	failure	discipline
terror	freedom	courtesy
teamwork	generosity	happiness
friendship	success	sadness
prejudice	tolerance	greed

When we share the results, everyone's understanding of these words is deepened. The images students come up with are far more imaginative than mine. When an image is slightly off target, lively class discussion clarifies shades of meanings.

Marcia Sauvie, Carman High School, Flint, Michigan

Vary Verbs

This little lesson is twenty-five years old, and I have used it annually with students of all ages. The idea came from a text that is probably obsolete, and I have long since forgotten its title.

Teachers of writing generally remind students to use fewer verbs of being and to rely on the active voice. We emphasize that the verb provides the real muscle in the sentence, and we urge students to choose their verbs with care. I add that listless, all-purpose verb *get* to the discussion. Because it can stand in for so many words, *get* is too imprecise for most purposes except conversation. When we finish the following assignment, students have learned that *get* is much too general for effective written communication. Best of all, they realize that without access to dictionary or thesaurus they have come up with useful alternatives from their own vocabularies. The assignment works well with an overhead projector or handouts, but can also be tackled using the chalkboard. The teacher can add one statement at a time onto the chalkboard, pausing in between for students to discuss the possible alternatives to *get* and to decide on the best one. The completed list can then be reviewed and revised, if desired.

Directions to students: *Get* is a useful word. It's short and direct, but it's also overworked and bland. Improve these sentences by inserting stronger, more precise verbs. In the process, you may rewrite the sentence in any way you choose. Do not, however, solve the problem by inserting the same verb in any two sentences.

1. Where did you get such a severe cold in the middle of the summer?
2. The scouts can not go to camp until they get enough money by selling papers.
3. Sue had to leave the game early since she had to get dinner for the family at six o'clock.
4. Do you know anyone who could get six tickets to the show at this late date?
5. Our family is planning to get a cottage at the lake for two months next year.
6. Eddie was disappointed because he had ten chances to score but did not get one ball into the basket.
7. Have you heard which of the two cars Mr. Sanders decided to get?
8. Would you get me a railroad schedule when you go to the station?
9. Do you think that you could get your father to drive us to the game, Paul?
10. If Scott can get a home run, the score will be tied.

11. The newspaper announced that our school will have to get three new teachers next term.
12. No matter how often I speak before the class, I get nervous.
13. Our canary escaped from its cage, and we never did get it.
14. It seems as if Kenneth cannot get an A in music, no matter how hard he tries.
15. If the bus leaves on time, we should get home shortly after dark.
16. Not one fish did the campers get although they fished all day.
17. That motorist is going to get a ticket for overtime parking.
18. Please get your car from the parking lot.
19. The best way to get a raccoon is to hunt at night.
20. The detective cautioned the policeman not to let the prisoner get away.
21. Mrs. Warner must not be at home, because I can not get her on the telephone.
22. It is amazing that Mrs. Barton can get along on what she makes cleaning offices.
23. The procedure was explained over and over, but Sam did not get the idea.
24. Our whole school is going to get behind our glee club and raise money for its trip to the state contest.
25. Did you get the point of this assignment?

When students have finished rewriting the sentences, ask volunteers to share their improved versions. Students may not agree in each case on the best alternative to *get*, but the class discussion will help them see just how many different choices they have.

Edith Broida, Roosevelt Middle School, Oak Park, Michigan

Erasmus and the Changing Sentence

During the Renaissance, Erasmus challenged students in his writing classes to try their hands at turning out as many variations of a sentence as they could. He himself tossed off 150. You needn't ask students to match Erasmus's accomplishment, but why not explain Erasmus's challenge to your students and give them a version of the same assignment, with one crucial change. Ask them to choose a well-known figure—an author, a film star, a character from a novel—and to let that individual's personality reshape their sentences.

Here's the sentence Erasmus used for his challenge:

(In Latin) *Tuae litterae me magnopere delectarunt*

(in English) Your letter delighted me very much.

Here are only a few of Erasmus's 150 variations:

Your epistle has cheered me greatly.

On reading your letter I was filled with joy.

When your letter came, I was seized with extraordinary pleasure.

And here are some variations produced by last year's classes:

Your letter is perfectly clear. (Richard Nixon)

Your letter came in handy. (Venus de Milo)

Your letter possessed my mind for days. (Linda Blair)

I lost my head over your letter. (Marie Antoinette)

Your letter was good, but it could've been better. (Dad)

Students will enjoy reading their own sentence variations aloud to the class; the class as a whole may decide which sentences most imaginatively convey a sense of the writer's personality.

Michael O. Stegman, Shoreham-Wading River High School, Shoreham, New York

Visual Contexts

In this activity students engage in a divergent thinking exercise, write brief descriptions in the genre of their choice, provide evaluations of each other's work, and revise their writing. The handout can be used with students across a wide range of ability levels, but it provides an enjoyable, nonthreatening writing assignment for students who are usually reluctant to write.

Instructions. Tell students that the assignment gives them a chance to exercise their imaginations while writing descriptions in the forms they find most comfortable. Distribute the handout and go over the instructions. Discuss *context,* since the word has applications in other areas of English instruction. (You might briefly remind students how sentence context gives clues to the meaning of an unfamiliar word.) Emphasize that artwork is not the main point of the assignment. Rather, the drawing is a rough sketch of the student's idea; it provides a starting point for the description.

Drafting. After students have completed the two descriptions, remind them to enter a pseudonym or a four-digit number on the handout and on each description, recording the name or number for future reference. Collect each student's drawings and descriptions, and redistribute them. No one should receive his or her own set of materials.

Peer Critiques. Ask each student to write, on a separate sheet of paper, helpful comments about the descriptions he or she receives. This informal critique should tell which of the two descriptions the reviewer liked better and why. It should also include at least one suggestion for improving each description. Ask students to focus at this point on the *ideas* in the description rather than on punctuation, spelling, and other details, which will be handled later at the proofreading stage. Students should sign their critiques with the pseudonyms or numbers they chose earlier.

Revision. All handouts, descriptions, and critiques are handed back to the original writers, who identify themselves by pseudonyms or numbers, and who now undertake the suggested revisions. Tell students that they may revise in accordance with their own ideas if they disagree with the suggestions. Invite them to ask your opinion on approaches to revision.

Audiences. Collect all revisions. Volunteers may read aloud their descriptions and place them on a bulletin board. Additionally, you might select other descriptions to read aloud yourself, with the authors' permission.

Visual Contexts

Each of the pictures below is incomplete. Complete the pictures by sketching in a fuller *context* for the event taking place. *You don't have to be an artist!* Draw in a simple, freehand style; use matchstick figures if you like. Then select *two* of the completed pictures and, on separate sheets of paper, write a brief description of what is happening in each picture.

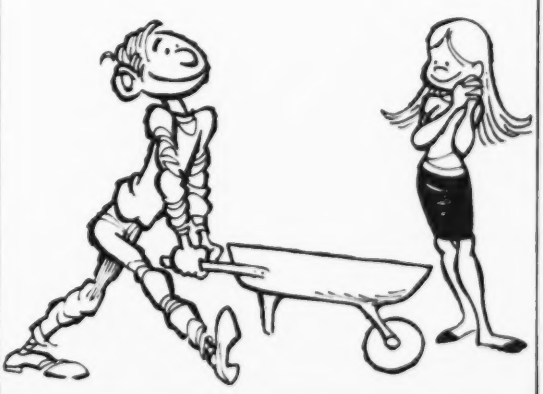
Your description may be humorous or serious. They can be written as literal descriptions, as short stories, or as poems. Instead of writing your name on this handout and on your descriptions, use a pseudonym (made-up name) or a four-digit number. Make a note of your pseudonym or number so you won't forget it.

1.

2.

3.

4.



drawings by Robert C. Harvey

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